Appomattox County . . . Yesterday And Today

By Paul Ghioto

(Author's Note:

The throngs of people visiting the historical park during the recent weekend helped commemorate the 110th anniversary of the surrender - an event which led to the eventual establishment of the park 35 years ago on April 10, 1940. Whether viewing park exhibits, art show entries, an award - winning film about the Civil War or talking to Living History soldiers, the visitors experienced an opportunity to recall the historic events of 1865.

The following story of Lee's surrender . . . (The following story of Lee's surrender was written by Mrs. Rachel Lawson, former correspondent of The News at Appomattox. It was first published in that paper in 1947. The aged former slave who gave Mrs. Lawson the colorful account of this historic event has since died.)

APPOMATTOX, April 8, 1947 - Martha Mildred Stevens Craig, better known as "Aunt Millie" and very spry for her 89 years, delights in telling her story of the surrender which took place here April 9, 1865, just 77 years ago Thursday.

Aunt Millie, quaint, timid, and full of interest in her white and negro friends, was active for her age until last spring when she was struck by a bolt of lightning while in bed. She now walks with the aid of a cane, keeps house for her only son, "Uncle Bob" Craig, who has served as janitor at Appomattox High School for several generations.

Aunt Millie was 13 at the time of the surrender and was the nurse maid of Charlie Sackett Peers, six month old son of Mr. and Mrs. George T. Peers. Mr. Peers was at the time clerk of the Court of Appomattox and was living near the scene of the surrender.

"I was walking de floor, pattin my baby to sleep, when those yankee soldiers came bustin' in Marse George's house. The soldiers hollered for everybody to leave de house 'cause the worst battle ever fought was starting right den. Marse George fetched Miss Jennie by de hand and rushed her off to the hay loft in the stable.

"My Missus was powerful excitable and nervous and Marse George knew he had to get away from all de soldiers. Marse George must have thought I was going to follow wid de little baby, but instead I darted in another room and crept behind Miss Jennie's Linen chest. I kept patting my little white baby all the time.

"The first chance I had, I peeped out de window and saw ever so many soldiers pushing a large cannon right in front of the steps to the house. The generals were givin' orders and de soldiers were linin' up and I never saw as many guns before in all my life. I commenced to think hard."

Got Her Dress

"Marse George and Misses Jennie had left their little lamb in my care and I just had to keep him safe. I thought about the pretty plaid dress Misses Jennie had made for me to go to the church meetin' in. I ran back to another room and slipped the dress from the wardrobe and tied it 'round my waist. While all de soldiers were busy, charging and carryin' on, I tucked dat baby's head under my arm, ran out de front door, jumped over dat cannon and ran down the hill faster than I had ever run before or have ever since. I was darting bullets, first to de right and den to de left. I saw white ladies hollering and runing in all directions. I heard the generals holler - "Charge bayonets, forward march, fight.'

Found a Gully

"I found a gully, a right deep one too, and I laid my scared baby flat on de ground, I hovered over him and reached up and pulled brush over us. I kept patting dat baby. I knew dem soldiers would find us if the baby cried."

"Finally, after what seemed hours to me, a kind soldier, I'll never forget de gentleman, who carried a white flag and was riding a horse, jumped the ditch and halted. He said, "Little girl, it's all over now. Take de baby home. Lee has surrendered to Grant."

"I didn't know whether to believe the man or not, so I eased up and peeped out and saw some white ladies walking around so I knew it was safe for me to take the chile out. I knew Marse George won't worrin' about the baby though, 'cause he knew I would risk my life for that chile."

"Aunt Millie laughed at this point and said, 'Mrs. Lawson, let me tell you something funny. There was a young white gal, Miss Puss Nowlin, walking along near me and she was plenty hot with those Yankees.One of the walking officers spoke to her and told her that Lee had surrendered. Miss Puss flared up and said, "You're a liar, you Yankee devil,' and de officer replied, 'you're another, you damn rebel.'

"When I reached the house the band was playing, horses runnin' and soldiers singin'. I ran in the house, still pattin' the baby, sneaked a ham out of de pantry and hid it up the chimney. I was looking after Marse Georg's interest, and I knew those soldiers were hungry and would grab dat ham if they spied it."

"One Yankee soldier came in drinking and walked up and slapped the baby, drawing the blood out of his little fat cheeks. I begged him to please not kill us. He cussed, ripped de shares and tore the curtains up. I slipped to de front door and told General Chamberlain, who had been campin' in Marse George's yard for several days. The general told some soldiers to drag the drunk out of de house. They handled him so rough, I begged 'em not to kill him, although I was powerful mad 'cause he had slapped my white chile. I backed the blood from his little cheeks, 'cause I knew Missus Jennie would faint if she saw blood on her baby chile."

Put Them To Bed

"I ran to the stable loft and called Marse George. He led Missus Jennie in de house and we put her to bed and laid her baby beside her."

"But 'Bout dat time the soldiers rushed in and wanting some vitals. Marse George told me to feed 'em. They ate faster than I could cook. One soldier gave me a green back dollar, and I passed it on to Marse George. He said it was the first he had ever owned."

"I was ordered to go to the well and get fresh water. When I got there I found several soldiers standin' around a horse. They asked me if I wanted the horse and told them that I didn't have no use for a horse. I was so scared I couldn't hardly draw de water. One soldier spoke up and said if I would accept the horse, he would give me a bridle too. He said de horse was a little blind from gun powder smoke but he would get all right. I told them I would take de horse and they said I would have to dance first. They sang and clapped their hands, and I danced, 'cause I was scared not to. I walked back to Marse George's house with a bucket of water in one hand and leading that ole blind horse with the other hand. I told Marse George what de soldiers had done and he took the horse and put it in the stable. We fed that horse and used him for years afterwards hitched to de buggy."

I happened to think about the cows and pigs and I ran to the barn yard. Those soldiers had killed out our only cow and skinned her. They had taken my little baby's white pet pig and cut its feet off. I just sat down and cried right in the barn yard."

Aunt Millie closed her story of the last battle by saying, "Nobody slept that night. There was too much going on - singing, hollering, drinking and music galore. I was to skeered to sleep."

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